How Runaway and Homeless Youth Navigate Troubled Waters: The Role of Formal and Informal Helpers

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Abstract:

Most adolescents navigate the transition from adolescence to young adulthood with relative success. However, runaway and homeless youth experience formidable obstacles in their paths and engage in dangerous behaviors that threaten their well being and long-term prospects. This study is part of a larger exploratory research effort aimed at understanding how runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of their adolescence to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood. The focus of this paper is to report findings related to the formal and informal helping resources that enable runaway and homeless youth to resolve difficulties, deal with hazards, and achieve some level of self-defined success in young adulthood. This study utilized a qualitative research design, and the primary data collection method was in-depth interviews with 12 formerly run-away and homeless young people. The constant comparative method was used to analyze the data. Evidence emerged regarding who provided help, the types of help provided, conditions that facilitated acceptance of help, and advice to helping professionals. The findings illustrate the experiences youth had with helpers that they found valuable and experiences they perceived as detrimental.

Keywords: Runaway and Homeless Youth; Qualitative Research; Help Seeking; Successful Transitions.

Article:

Most adolescents navigate the transition from adolescence to young adulthood with relative success. With healthy families, sound schools, and supportive communities, youth grow up to meet society's expectations for family life, work, and citizenship. Even under difficult circumstances, most young people grow up to be responsible and productive adults. Others, however, experience formidable obstacles in their paths and engage in dangerous behaviors that threaten their well being and long-term prospects. For a significant number of adolescents, running away or otherwise prematurely leaving their families is a way of trying to cope with difficult personal and family circumstances.

During the past three decades the problem of runaway and homeless youth has emerged as a serious and significant social challenge to policy makers, human service providers, and communities. In 1994, the U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Affairs calculated that 1.3 to 1.6 million young people are homeless each year. One child in 8 will run away prior to age 18, and 40% of them do not return to the same living situation they had before running away (Whitbeck & Simons, 1990).

Zide and Cherry (1992) developed a typology of runaway and homeless youth according to their reasons for leaving home. The four categories include: (1) running to—youth seeking adventure who frequently return home but when living on the street engage in high risk behaviors; (2) running from—youth fleeing family situations that are conflictual, alienating, and dangerous (e.g, alcoholism, family violence, and neglect); (3) thrown out—youth who are alienated from their families and who frequently have a history of problems with

school and the law; and (4) forsaken—youth from families that can no longer financially support them. After leaving home, these youth often experience housing instability and may end up living in a variety of places over time, such as youth shelters, group homes, foster homes, psychiatric hospitals, on the street. They may move from friend to friend, a phenomenon known as "couch surfing." They are at risk for problem behaviors such as drug abuse, delinquency, sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, dropping out of school, and violence (Council on Scientific Affairs, 1990; Kipke, Montgomery, Simon, Unger, & Johnson, 1997; Kurtz, Jarvis, & Kurtz, 1991). These vulnerable and displaced youth frequently live in high risk situations, have few stable social supports, experience non-normative life events, and face multiple problems (Rice, Herman, & Petersen, 1993).

Although much research has been done to identify the reasons youth run away or become homeless, the magnitude of the problem, and the hazards these youth face, very little is known about how they are able to overcome these challenges and make successful transitions into adulthood. As researchers were conceptualizing this project, we were struck by the analogy of runaway and homeless youth as sailors on a troubled sea, experiencing rough waters and having to make decisions about how to navigate to successfully reach port. We incorporated this analogy into our overall research question: "How do runaway and homeless adolescents navigate the troubled waters of their adolescence—leaving home prematurely, living in high-risk environments, and engaging in dangerous behaviors—to make successful developmental transitions into young adulthood?" This question reflects the researchers' interest in utilizing a strength-based perspective to identify the keys to successful problem solving and marks a move away from a problem-focused perspective that emphasizes understanding the causes and negative consequences of social problems. This paper reports on findings from the first part of this ongoing study, related to the formal and informal helping resources that enable runaway and homeless youth to resolve difficulties and make successful transitions. A subsequent paper will report findings related to personal factors youth perceived to be important to creating success in their lives.

In general, adolescents feel isolated and are disinclined to trust for-mal helping agencies (Bielicki, 1972; Ross, 1980). For instance, O'Brien, Johnson, and Schmink (1978) asked 349 adolescents with whom they would want to discuss issues of death and dying. Friends were chosen most often, followed by parents, ministers, and counselors. In a related study on suicide prevention, Ross (1980) found that students uniformly said they would turn to friends for help rather than formal helpers in the school or community. In another effort to determine where adolescents go for help, Barth and Schinke (1984) discovered that adolescent parents tended to avoid seeking assistance from both formal and informal sources. In a study of help seeking patterns, Veroff, Kulka, and Douvan (1981) found that young people under age 18 were less likely than older people to seek help from for-mal sources. These studies indicate that, in general, adolescents are reluctant to seek help, particularly from formal agencies.

This study focuses on the types of help runaway and homeless youth received from both formal and informal sources that they believed enabled them to resolve difficulties, deal with the hazards of being runaway/ homeless, and achieve some level of self-defined success in young adulthood. In addition, researchers inquired about advice these youth would give to professional helpers interested in preventing youth homelessness or helping troubled young people create success for themselves.

Youth perceptions of what is helpful and not helpful are important to social workers and other professionals who work with runaway, homeless, and otherwise troubled youth. Such information can be utilized for program planning as well as to inform individual interactions with youth. Professionals can also use this information to consult with family members and friends of troubled youth to help them understand how they can be helpful to these youth as well. It is important to understand what types of helping adolescents perceive as useful and appropriate for them, rather than assuming that what is helpful for adults or younger children will also be helpful to adolescents.

Methodology

Because of the exploratory nature of the study and the absence of previous research related to successful

transitions for this population, the research team used a qualitative research design. Qualitative methodologies are the most appropriate approach for studying perceptions, subjective experiences, and the meaning of those experiences (Gilgun, 1992) as they allow researchers to capture a richness and depth of information that is lacking in quantitative approaches.

Data Collection

The research team utilized focus group methodology as a beginning point for design of the questionnaire used in the study. Focus groups were conducted with 30 peer educators from runaway and youth homeless shelters. Researchers inquired about their ideas of success and how troubled youth are able to become successful despite the many crises in their lives. A focus group was also conducted with 22 social service providers who worked with current and former runaway and homeless youth regarding their perceptions of these same issues. Information from these focus groups served as the basis for creation of a semi-structured interview guide. Service providers at two shelters subsequently reviewed the questionnaire and made suggestions for modification. The interview guide was modified as data were collected and analyzed to reflect conceptual questions that emerged. The final version of the interview guide included the following major subject areas: demographic information; difficult times youth had experienced; how they had made it through those times; who helped them and what types of help they received; what advice they would give to professional helpers; their current situation; their personal definition of success; and future hopes and plans.

All four members of the research team conducted interviews. The interviews, which were conversational in nature, were usually conducted in shelters or group homes, although some were conducted in participants' homes. The interviews ranged in length from 50 to 90 minutes; they were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Although the researchers experienced some difficulty in locating potential participants, once engaged in the process the young people appeared to enjoy sharing their thoughts and opinions. Participants were paid $30 in cash upon completion of their interviews.

Sample

The research team conducted face-to-face interviews with 12 participants who were identified by staff at shelters and group homes in two North Carolina cities and three Georgia towns. To be included in the study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) they had to be between the ages of 18–25; (2) they had to have stayed in a youth shelter, group home, or other alternative living arrangement as an adolescent; and (3) they had to have not lived in a shelter or other alternative accommodation for at least two years. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Of the 12 participants, 3 were male, 9 were female, 9 were White, and 3 were African American. Six of the youth were from Georgia, and 6 were from North Carolina. They ranged in age from 18 to 25. Most of the youth had either graduated from high school or had completed a GED, with the exception of Clark who was still a senior in high school, Andy who had been expelled at age 16, and Yvonne who had dropped out of 10th grade the week before the interview. Three of the youth were in college, 1 had completed a vocational degree, 6 were working and not attending school, and 2 were neither employed nor working. According to Zide and Cherry's (1992) typology two of the youth were "running to." Terry and Wanda both left home because they were unwilling to abide by parental rules and wanted to be independent. Six youth were "running from." Drew, Mandy, Yvonne, June, and Susan ended up in shelters or group homes because of family conflict; Kameka was escaping long term sexual abuse. Four youth would be considered "thrown out," because of their involvement with the legal system, child welfare officials, or problems with substance abuse and their parents' unwillingness or inability to handle them in the home (Andy, Carrie, Clark, and Trisha). None of the youth were "forsaken." These participants had lived in one or more of the following alternative arrangements: relatives, foster care, shelter, group home, detention facility, or psychiatric hospital. Three youth had lived on the street at some point. Six of these youth had been involved in illegal substance use, 7 had been in charged with an offense, and 4 reported psychiatric treatment before, during, or after their period of homelessness.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, which involves analyzing data as it is collected and using preliminary findings to shape future interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The intent of the data analysis process was to build a conceptual framework that reflected participant experiences and perceptions regarding factors that enabled them to resolve their difficulties, and regarding help they received.

The data analysis process began as all four researchers reviewed the first six interview transcripts to identify initial categories that seemed to encompass the experiences youth described. Open coding methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were employed to discover the factors, ideas, and experiences that youth perceived to have been important in their lives. Researchers used a process Miles and Huberman (1994) call "check-coding" to clarify definitions and enhance inter-coder agreement. After the initial review of transcripts, all four researchers reanalyzed a single transcript using the initial categories that emerged from open coding. The researchers then discussed coding to clarify definitions. Next, two team members, using the initial categories that emerged from the open coding closely reanalyzed each of the other 11 transcripts. Researchers who analyzed the same transcripts worked closely to continue the process of clarification. Thus, two researchers coded each transcript. Additional conceptual categories were added and existing categories were modified as analysis proceeded.

Once all transcripts had been analyzed, the NUDIST qualitative data analysis program (Qualitative Solutions & Research, 1997) was used to code specific transcript segments to the conceptual categories that had emerged. The NUDIST program was used to sort the data according to the conceptual categories, and researchers then engaged in a third level of analysis, as they proceeded to compare the segments that had been coded with each other and with the full set of conceptual categories. At the end of this analytic step, some modifications were made in the conceptual framework, resulting in the findings presented below.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how formal and informal helpers assisted runaway and homeless youth navigate the troubled waters of their disrupted lives. All the participants indicated that help from others was a critical factor in being able to resolve problems they faced. Researchers inquired about three specific aspects of helping: types of help youth received; those who provided youth with help; and advice youth would give to professional helpers. Youth identified three major types of helpers (family, friends, and professional helpers) and five types of help they perceived as important (caring, trustworthiness, setting boundaries and holding youth accountable, concrete assistance, and counseling). In addition to elements of help researchers inquired directly about, another element of help emerged from the data: conditions under which youth were able or willing to accept help. These conditions included perceived trustworthiness of the helper and youth's readiness to accept help.

Types of Help Youth Received

Four categories of help emerged from interviews with the youth were: caring, setting boundaries and holding youth accountable, concrete assistance, and professional intervention. Each of the 12 youth reported receiving one or more of these types of help from others.

Caring

Eleven of the participants talked about being cared for by others as a form of help they received. Caring did not involve trying to cure or solve their problems. Rather caring entailed individualized attention, unconditional acceptance, nonjudgmental listening, and emotional support. Words and phrases that expressed caring included: "being there for me," "praying for me," "staying in touch with me," "being available when I need her," "letting me make tough decisions but guiding me," "listening rather than telling me what to do," "treating me like I was her own," and "reaching out to me." The caring provided youth with a sense of safety, support, understanding, and warmth.

Setting Boundaries and Holding Youth Accountable

Ten of the 12 participants spoke about the importance of family and professional helpers who "talked straight" to them, challenged them, held them accountable for their actions, confronted them with the consequences of their actions, and set boundaries. In talking about Ms. Pat, Mandy said, "She was giving it to you straight, telling you what you needed to hear.... She didn't have any pity on me." Mandy also spoke about how her aunt "made me realize that things aren't going to get no better unless I make it better." Her aunt was tough on her, requiring that she perform certain chores and take on certain responsibilities. Carrie commented on how "my Mama put me on house arrest" for getting a DUI. Her probation officer "was real strict, but it was her job to be strict, especially after what I had done.... I gave her a hard time because she tried to tell me who I could see and what I could do." To this day Carrie knows that her former probation officer still cares about her, and she realizes that "She's what kept me from being sent off to detention."

Concrete Assistance

Nine of the youth appreciated concrete assistance they received from family, friends, and professionals. Concrete assistance took many forms such as temporary shelter in a teacher's home, sheltered living, living with a relative, groceries from neighborhood drug dealers for a family of children whose parents had abandoned them, payment for drug screen tests, medication to treat mental illness, money for school, transportation, and school.

Professional Intervention

This category of help includes a wide range of interventions including conversations with shelter staff, formal counseling or therapy, and full-scale residential treatment programs. Seven participants indicated that some form of professional intervention helped them resolve problems and get their lives back on track. Such interventions were aimed at a wide variety of problems and issues: substance abuse, child abuse, family relations, interpersonal relations, mental health, sexual orientation, and career development. Among the approaches youth found helpful were crisis intervention, problem solving, family counseling, insight therapy, communication skill building, group work, and teaching about Native American spirituality.

Types of Helpers

Family Members

All 12 youth talked about the roles their families played in their adolescent years. Some of these roles were helpful, some were not. Many grew up in dysfunctional families from which they wanted to escape. Most of the youth ran away from their families at one time or another, and some spent most of their childhood living in foster homes. It appears that most of the youth had rather volatile histories with their families. Like many of the other participants, June felt that relationships with her family were like a roller coaster. At times she felt supported, and at other times she could not rely on her parents. After living in foster care much of her life, of her own volition, Wanda went to live with her mother one summer. It was an important reconnection for her, but at the same time she realized that she needed to return to her foster home if she intended to finish high school.

Despite the volatility in family relations, a number of youth reported that their parents or other family members were sources of caring and support at critical times in their lives, such as during an unplanned pregnancy, when the youth was arrested and jailed, or during a deep depression. As Mandy explained:

> I always knew my Momma was there for me, that she was going to be there for me, but when I started dating this guy, it was like, he totally took control of my life, and my Momma knew that, and it sort of caused some problems between me and her. So I just knew she was going to hate me for being pregnant, especially by him, but she didn't.

Help from family members included concrete help with financial support, housing, transportation, support for schooling, and health care. Family members also provided emotional support and encouragement. For example, when Clark had legal problems he said, "I just talked to my parents because they wouldn't turn their back on me

even though I did do wrong. They just tried to encourage me and keep on encouraging me until I did get it right." Similarly, when Susan attempted suicide and was hospitalized, it was her parents who really got her through, "If I had an outburst, they just let me have it. They didn't try to make me keep my feelings locked in. They let me do what I wanted to do in relation to that."

Relatives other than parents were also helpful. Siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents were all cited as providing assistance. For example, Mandy's aunt and uncle helped her through a major depression, and she said, "They were like my guides, you know, they were guiding me through. They were letting me make my own choices and decisions, but they were guiding me." In Mandy's case, the guidance was quite strict because her aunt "made me clean my room, she gave me a job working with her. She was my boss basically 24 hours a day with her. She made me clean the house.... She just got me back into routine."

The family was not always a source of assistance, however. For instance, a critical part of Trisha's recovery and growth has been her separation from her mother and her mother's life. However, Trisha, like some of the other youth seemed to become closer to her parents in her later adolescent years, despite a rocky family history. Although still very cautious about the relationship with her family, Trisha explained how it has changed:

> My father and, well sort of my mother too, are coming to terms with the fact that I didn't have a really great childhood. I had these problems. Recognizing now that I am in recovery and that they were doing the best they knew how ... because that's the way they were raised, but they were doing the best possibly that they knew how to do ... I wish I could have changed the relationship I had with them so I could be close. I can't do that at this time. My friends are my family, and I am fine with that.

Even so, Trisha has not totally given up on her relationship with her mother: "I keep going back actually every couple of years, and I'll give her another chance. Or I'll give that whole thing another chance and be like, 'Okay, maybe she's changed, maybe he's changed.'" It seems important that youth heal strained family relationships when possible.

Friends

Three-quarters of the interviewed youth commented on the importance of friends, some of them long-term friends and others more recent acquaintances. As Trisha said, "I like that I have very good friends and very special people in my life that I'm honored to have in my life." Friends were seen as sources of unconditional support, as valued confidants, and even as chosen family members. As Mandy said, "My friends are just like, do what you want to do, you know, it's your choice. We'll stand by you either way ... one of my friends ... she's like my sister." Sometimes friends were seen as the only ones who could be trusted and sometimes they provided the motivation for a young person to change. June credited a friend with inspiring her to quit drugs: "I was doing some drugs then, and he helped me come off of those and showed me that my life could be more wonderful without them."

Professionals

All the youth except Terry mentioned working with professional helpers. Some of the helpers had formal degrees in fields such as education, social work, and psychology, but the practice of many helpers was based on their life experiences with runaway and homeless youth rather than on formal education. Professional helpers stepped in when families and friends were unwilling or unable to help. In many instances youth received professional services they did not request, for example, receiving counseling services as a result of going to a shelter or being set to a hospital or treatment center against their will. Professional helpers provided assistance in meeting basic needs, developing communication and anger management skills, providing structure and positive activities, and planning for the future. Through the programs operated by professionals youth learned manage feelings, improve relationships with family members, and stop using alcohol and drugs. Some professional helpers became role models for youth. As Trisha said,

> The friends I had acquired weren't good for me. So, you know, the role models I had at that treatment

> center were like the best things in my life and like my therapist that put me there in the first place, she's still my role model. You know, she's an incredible woman.

The professionals youth perceived as helpful were caring but also held youth accountable for their actions. As Mandy described her counselor, "She didn't have no pity on me whatsoever. None. But I guess I had a lot, I felt sorry for myself, but she had no pity." Sometimes youth resented helpers' strict rules at the time, but in retrospect saw their value. Carrie said of her probation officer:

> She was pretty strict, and I gave her a hard time because she tried to tell me who I could see and who I couldn't see, and what I could do and what I couldn't do, and she was just doing her job by doing that. I mean, she was supposed to do that. But, you know, I'd sit there and fuss with her, tell her she wasn't going to tell me who I could see and who I couldn't see, and who to hang around and everything. Her standing up for me like she did, it was a shock. I mean it really was.... I knew she cared about me, and to this day me and her still talk, and I mean I'm not on probation or nothing. I've been off for I think about a year and a half, two years now, but we still talk. I love her to death for it. She's what kept me from being sent off.

For many youth, professional helpers were a primary constant in lives filled with change and confusion. As Many said:

> Over the years, you know, [Ms. Pat] would call me, send me a Christ-mas card, ask how I was doing, letting me know I could come back and talk to her ... she always stood by me, no matter what I did, or what anybody did to me, she always stood by me. She didn't give up on me ... I would call her and talk to her all the time, and she wouldn't tell me what to do or anything, she was just there to listen ... even now, I feel like I'm getting down or I can't handle something, can't handle a problem or something I call Ms. Pat. She's like, I don't know, she's al-ways there you know, I have her phone number. If I have a problem, I call her.

Providing clients with a home phone number, even after they have left the program and reached adulthood is not standard practice, but Ms. Pat was not the only professional helper who crossed those boundaries. A number of youth identified teachers, counselors, and foster parents who went beyond their assigned roles to take on more significant roles. Kameka actually went to live with a counselor who worked at the group home where she had been living:

> And I was like 'What? All the stuff I done to you and you going [to let me come live with you]?'. . . and so I was getting ready to graduate and Dot said, "Have you thought about what you're going to do, you know, after you get out of school here?" I was like, "Yeah, want to go off to school somewhere else if they accept me." And she was like, "Well, I talked to my husband, and we want you to come and stay with us." After I went off to college, I started coming back home with Dot and them.

> Not all professionals were seen as helpful, however. Those who were not helpful were perceived as uncaring, uninvolved, and manipulating clients to make their jobs easier. Yvonne described her experiences in a number of psychiatric facilities:

> They didn't care at all. All they cared about was throwing your butt in a room and locking you up somewhere or restraining you ... those people basically had an attitude. They didn't care how you felt or they didn't want to hear it. They didn't even want to hear it. All they cared about was their little groups and making you do, what they wanted you to do and that was it.

Conditions That Facilitated Acceptance of Help

Many of the youth who participated in this study had multiple experiences with persons who were willing to help them, including family, friends, and professionals. Youth did not always take advantage of such

opportunities, however. Youth indicated that two conditions had to be present in order for youth to utilize such help: they had to perceive the helper as trustworthy and they had to be ready to accept help.

Trustworthiness of the Helper

The trustworthiness of family and friends, but especially professional helpers, was an important issue for seven of the youth. Virtually all the participants had been involved with multiple professional helpers, many of whom "came and went" after a short period of assisting the youth. Youth were skeptical of helpers. For instance, Mandy spoke of the difficulty she had in trusting adults and what it meant to trust Ms. Pat, a shelter worker: "I trusted her when I came to the shelter. She was the only person who was barely getting through to me. I believed she was telling me the truth.... She never told me anything that wasn't true." June, who described herself as a very private person, talked about the importance of confidentiality and having someone who was "just very easy to talk to and count on." These qualities helped her form a close relationship with a professional counselor: "I just feel like I bonded with her, and she did too. I love her to death." Trisha revealed another aspect of trust when she spoke of the risk of being abandoned or terminated after completing a treatment program. She felt that the discharge planning for her was invaluable: "You just don't feel like you've been abandoned and like, 'Oh, my God, I'm out on the street doing nothing.'"

Participants also provided numerous examples of encounters with helpers that made them distrustful. Examples include breaking confidentiality, pathologizing youth, not keeping promises, and being treated like an object. Kameka talked about being let down by a resident counselor who she had thought cared about her: "When I went off to college everything changed. I kept saying, 'Why hasn't she sent me a letter?' She kind of let me down.... A lot of people make promises that they never keep." Yvonne is a vivid illustration of a young person who has learned to be very distrustful of helpers. She talked at length about how one day at school she told a friend she was de-pressed, and, in the course of that conversation, she mentioned suicide. Her friend told a teacher who, in turn, informed her foster parents. Quickly the situation escalated, and Yvonne was hospitalized involuntarily. She felt that no one was listening to her,

> So, I showed them my butt. I gave them an attitude because they took me to a place that I didn't know I was going ... They try to figure out what is wrong with you and put you on medication or something like that.

Currently, one of her strategies for getting help is to call confidential help-lines rather than trust in personal encounters. As a result of experiences such as Yvonne's, youth often tested helpers to see if they were trustworthy. Without this sense of trust, youth were not likely to be open to help.

Readiness to Accept Help

Whether the help was provided by a professional, friend, or family member, timing was the key. Youth needed to be ready to accept the help offered. As Trisha explained,

> I know from trying to help other people, and trying to give them what I have found it's like some people just are not ready to accept it. Some people are just not in the stage where they can hear what you're saying.

Some young people felt that they had to make mistakes before they could realize they needed help. Rather than being able to learn from observing peers who got into trouble or learn from advice they were given, they had to try out risky behavior for themselves. For example, Clark said,

> I got in trouble, that's when I had to go to that [shelter program] ... and dealing with the court, and probation and all that stuff. And I just realized that's not what I wanted to do.... I had to get in trouble first, to see.

For some, it was not simply a matter of making mistakes, but it seemed necessary for them to hit rock bottom

before they were open to receiving help. For instance, Trisha said, “I had to hit a certain point. I had to get to a certain low ... and I could open my eyes and reach out and ask for help and then found out that there was people reaching back.”

Sometimes that stage of readiness was precipitated by a frightening or traumatic experience that became a turning point in their lives. Such experiences included fear of losing custody of a child, parents’ divorce, and abuse. Six of the seven participants who had experienced arrest and/or serving time in jail, said those experiences prompted them to admit to themselves they needed help from others. For example, Terry said that facing the possibility of going to jail made her realize that she needed help to get out of the trouble she was in, and she turned to her family.

> I had no other choice. I had to either straighten my life up or stay in jail. And that was the ultimatum I was given. My father said, “I will sign your bond for you, but you will have to go live with your grand-mother. You will go to school and you will get a job. If not, if you haven’t shown any improvement in two weeks, I’ll come off your bond and you will go to jail until your court date. And then they will do whatever they want with you.” I said, “Oh my God, I can’t spend the rest of my life in jail. I’m too young ... I am really not that kind of person.”

Advice to Professional Helpers

Ten of the participants offered advice to professionals regarding how they might best assist runaway and homeless youth. Many of their comments reflect their own experiences—what they found helpful as well as detrimental.

The vast majority of participant responses regarding advice to professional helpers spoke to how they wanted to be treated by them. As they reflected back on their teen years, they saw themselves as experiencing a great deal of turmoil: living in unstable families, leaving home and moving from one place to another, and being relocated by child welfare and youth services. Rarely, if ever, did youth feel they had any adult they could consistently rely upon. As Kameka put it when talking about her relationship with staff at a group home, “you are here for so many years and then you are shipped off to a world that you have never seen before and you don’t have anybody.” The bottom line for some of them is that they do have opportunities to form relationships with caring helpers; however, except in rare instances, when the youth invariably moves on, the relationships cease and youth don’t, as Kameka said, “have anybody.”

Kameka warned that staff should not show favoritism to selected youth. “Never choose favorites as some did with me ... I loved it. I loved the attention. But in the end it hurt because when you leave you, you don’t have these people.” She said that what can make leaving even worse is that “a lot of people (staff) made promises to me that they never kept ... to keep up with me” after I left. The significance of helpers staying in touch with youth who move was illustrated when Kameka talked of how important it was for her to “receive a birthday card every now and then” from a staff member to whom she had been very rude.

So what did participants say that runaway and homeless youth need from helpers? First and foremost was trust, being there for them and listening to them. Trisha emphasized the importance of creating a safe space to join with staff and peers, to be able to talk, to get stuff out, and to explore deep personal issues. Many participants were distrustful or had never learned to trust others. A safe space provides a context for learning to trust. Trisha noted that “trust is big for most people I know who have come from situations like I have. So developing good trust is important.” According to Trisha, trust involves “being honest ... don’t tell them one thing and then you yourself go do some-thing else.” For Yvonne trust means “I have a person that I can talk to who wouldn’t get me into trouble or take my confidential information and say anything to somebody else.”

According to Carrie trust is cultivated and nurtured through helpers “being there for youth and listening to them.” She spoke of her own experience with a counselor at shelter:

> We started off friends. She told me that I didn't have to talk to if I didn't want to. It took several times for me to come here and really talk, to break my heart out to her. Because I was being made to come here. I didn't want to see a counselor, I'm not crazy! But everyone needs a friend and that's what she was to me ... We went for walks and she told me to talk about whatever I wanted to talk about. And, that's what I would tell counselors to be for their kids.

In cases where helpers have not encountered what youth have experienced, Terry said it is important to put "yourself in their [youth's] shoes. If they are getting beaten at home and they hate home, by God they have a reason to hate being home. Don't be saying to them 'I think you should go home.'" She went on to say that helpers need to accept the fact that "teenagers are going to try things at least once." Yvonne illustrated the importance of acceptance when she said, "The person I was deep down inside I really couldn't show it because nobody would accept it." Trisha believes that it takes time and patience on the part of helpers "to really get to know them ... once you get to know a person then it may be completely different from your first impression."

Most of the participants felt that the staff who were most helpful to them developed personal relationships rather than maintaining rigid helper-client boundaries. In some cases youth came to view their helpers as friends. Drew mentioned that "one of the counselors was definitely a more personable type person ... he was civic minded ... we were always doing things with him whether it was recycling glass or whatever."

While participants advised helpers to be nurturing and caring, several also mentioned the importance of not feeling sorry for youth. As Mandy put it, "Don't feel sorry for them. Be nice and everything, but when they give you an attitude, give it to them back. You gotta be tough. You gotta be firm and fair." Several youth talked about being strict and holding youth accountable. Kameka spoke of another reason for helpers not feeling sorry. "Don't feel sorry for me to help me out. I wanted people to understand what I was going through, but I never wanted pity from anybody. Pity is just the worst thing. Boost me along the way but don't pity me. It makes me feel helpless."

In contrast to participants' advice regarding how youth want to be treated in their relationships with helpers, no clear themes emerged regarding recommendations for program development. Despite the fact that most of the participants had been in various treatment and intervention programs during their teenage years, they did not draw on these experiences in the same fashion as they did when talking about relationships with helpers. The data regarding programmatic advice includes several random ideas such as keep the youth busy, tailor the help to the needs of the youth rather than fitting the youth to the program, use scared straight type tactics, and involve peers as role models. The paucity of participants' comments should not be interpreted to mean that services and programs were not valuable. Several talked at length about how the treatment programs benefited them, but there were no consistent patterns in their responses.

Discussion

While present day adolescents experience more reported problems than their parents or grandparents did during their teen years, there is mounting evidence that they may receive less social and emotional support (Christopher, Kurtz, & Howing, 1989). This may be especially true for runaway and homeless adolescents, many of whom have un-healthy family situations, associate with peers who live on the streets, and have short term encounters with a series of professional helpers from schools, shelters, child welfare, juvenile justice, and mental health agencies. The purpose of this study was to explore how formal and informal helpers assisted runaway and homeless youth to navigate the troubled waters of their disrupted lives. The participants, 12 formerly runaway and homeless youth, were asked to recall who were the significant persons that helped them deal with the crises and hazards they encountered and what kinds of help they found valuable.

Most of the young people in this study found guidance and protection from some person—a family member, friend, or professional helper. This finding parallels those of Garmzy (1983) and Warner and Smith (1982) who found that external support from adults and peers differentiated resilient children from peers who had problems coping in adolescence. In almost every case in this study there was at least one adult who helped youth navigate

the troubled waters. Despite turbulent family relationships, it was common for a parent, sibling, or extended family member to step forward and provide critical help in times of greatest need. However, not all youth could count on their family to be there for them. For some youth, families were obstacles to their efforts to turn their lives around. Some families were simply too dysfunctional, and the youth learned that it was healthier for them to maintain some distance.

Although at various times all the participants associated with peers involved with drugs, crime, sexually transmitted diseases, unplanned pregnancies, and other unhealthy behaviors, many youth had friends who were sources of protection and support. These friends were instrumental in helping youth through difficult times and being there for them on a regular basis. They were trusted confidants who helped them ameliorate problems and motivated them to change. In some cases, friends were viewed as sisters and brothers.

Professional helpers such as counselors, social workers, teachers, foster parents, ministers, therapists, and shelter staff also were in-valuable in helping some youth move through their difficult adolescent years. From their reports of the types of help they received, the facilitating conditions for such help, and their advice to professionals, participants clearly valued what Stanton-Salazar (1995) referred to as a multiplex relationship, i.e., a personalized relationship between the youth and helper in which the youth actively relies on the helper for many levels of support. The relationship is multiplex in that it transcends traditional client-worker roles and responsibilities. The helper is emotionally invested, authentic in his/her concern, and committed to the welfare of the adolescent. Interactions between helpers and clients are initiated by both parties. For young people in this study helpers served as counselors, mentors, confidants, advocates, friends, and substitute parents. Helpers invested a great deal of time, patience, nurturance, and acceptance into cultivating trusting relationships with skeptical youth. It was this kind of relationship that seemed most supportive and consequential for participants. By contrast, participants gave much less credit to the benefit of specific treatment programs and services. Caring, stable relationships seemed to be what they were seeking and found most beneficial.

The findings of this study point to a number of possible policy and practice implications. However, such implications must be considered with caution, given the exploratory nature of this study and the small nonrandom sample size. A note about generalizability in qualitative research is in order here. Within the qualitative paradigm, generalizability is conceptualized as "transferability" or the extent to which "findings fit into contexts outside of the study situation that are determined by the degree of similarity or goodness of fit between the two contexts" (Krefting, 1991, p. 216). It is the researcher's responsibility to present the findings in such a way that potential users of the information generated can decide for themselves the extent to which they believe the results can be applied to other situations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thus, the generalizability of qualitative research findings must be determined by the reader and considered in relation to situations in which they might apply the knowledge. Lincoln and Guba (1985) call this "user generalizability." One strategy for enhancing the transferability of qualitative findings is use of a nominated sample (Krefting, 1991). In this study, participants were nominated by key informants (shelter and group home staff) who were in a position to know whether participants met the criteria of the study and the extent to which potential participants were typical or atypical of runaway and/ or homeless youth. Future research in this area is needed to determine whether the perceptions and experiences of these 12 young people represent those of the youth runaway and homeless population at large.

One implication of the findings that emerged from this study is that programs designed for runaway and homeless youth need to be flexible and person-centered. They must avoid labeling and pathologizing youth. The types of professional help that youth reported had the greatest reported impact on them balanced structure with flexibility, rules with understanding, and concern for program integrity and consistency with recognition that the development and healing of an individual youth follows a unique path.

Second, a key overriding message is that people are more valuable than programs and that process is more important than outcomes. Reaching youth who are at risk requires an investment in human capital, i.e., helpers who have the time and talent to form trusting stable relationships and address the multiple needs of youth. On

the other hand, what seems counterproductive and even detrimental to these youth are well intended helping encounters that are short term and focused on a single categorical need. Mounting distrust seems to be a consequence for youth who experience one such helping encounter after another. Who can they count on not to let them down? Who can they really trust? In this era of managed care and cost containment this may be a difficult message to accept. Pressure is mounting to implement more cost containment measures in child welfare and youth services. Professional helpers must advocate for policies and procedures that permit and encourage helpers to treat youth as resources rather than simply objects or recipients of service (Lofquist, 1993).

Third, family and friends often continue to be critical players in the lives of these young people even after they have left home. Despite the difficult and strained relationships between many of these youth and their families, at crucial times some family members can productively be drawn back into important helping roles. Friends can also serve as powerful motivators and models for positive change. They can play key roles in a young person's recovery and growth process. Professionals who work with runaway and homeless youth need to recognize the importance of helping youth consider the possibility of reestablishing connections with family and friends who might be supportive and even engage in family counseling as appropriate to help resolve differences that keep youth and families apart.

Despite the limitations of this exploratory study, the dominant message it reflects is that young people want and need to make decisions for themselves, but they need others as well. These young people want and need the support, caring, and assistance of people, whether family, friends, or professionals, who have demonstrated trustworthiness, a belief in their value as a person, and a hope for their future. This positive mirroring, which reflects the young person's potential without ignoring the challenging realities they face, provides a powerful navigational tool for these young "sailors." Even in the absence of confirmatory research supporting the generalizability of the findings of this study, the values and ethics of the social work profession would sup-port policy, programs, and helping relationships that respond to these needs and desires.

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